



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

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**ENVIRONMENTAL
QUALITY COUNCIL**

copy

Sen. William Crismore, Chairman
Environmental Quality Council
Box 201704
Helena, MT 59620-1704

Dear Senator Crismore:

Pat Graham asked me to respond to your letter of December 28 requesting information about data FWP collects that might serve as indicators of conditions and trends in Montana's environment. Although FWP gathers extensive data each year on the status of the state's fish and wildlife populations and the habitats they occupy, this information may not serve the specific purpose the EQC has in mind very well.

For example, we survey deer, elk and antelope populations to assess annual productivity and herd size. These data are used for setting harvest quotas and managing populations in relation to established objectives. Quotas are adjusted annually in response to productivity, game damage concerns, etc. Any effect of larger environmental factors would likely be over-ridden by our management actions.

We monitor fish populations in many of our state waters to assess population status, set regulations and determine trends in population composition and abundance. These data are available in our stream data base. As with wildlife populations, trends in fish abundance and composition may be affected more by our management actions than environmental trends.

We monitor vegetation transects on numerous wildlife management areas to assess vegetative trends in relation to forage use by both domestic livestock and wildlife. Grazing rates by livestock and wildlife population size are managed in response to maintain certain habitat characteristics. Again, environmental trends would likely be masked by annual variation and our management response.

It may be possible, given sufficiently long strings of data and adequate analysis to identify trends in fish and wildlife populations that reflect certain environmental effects. At this time, however, my staff is not aware of which data sets in our records might fit that purpose, or how one would approach deduction of such relationships. If the EQC would like to have someone take a look at our data to pursue this option further, we would make our files available through some mutually convenient process.

FWP does obtain and use some data that may have application for monitoring environmental trends, such as precipitation, stream flows, etc. However, the EQC may be best served by working directly with the agencies, such as the National Weather Service or the Natural Resources Conservation Service that collect these data.

Sincerely,

Christian A. Smith
Chief of Staff

✓ c: Larry Mitchell, EQC